PAINTING THE TOWN RED
Unapologetically bold, distinctive and refreshing, The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center’s unconventional new logo solidified the institution’s status as a brand innovator and industry benchmark. That deliberate, almost defiant, red line striking through both the word and the disease “cancer” achieves what every marketing plan strives to accomplish—to be remembered; to be considered revolutionary; to cut through the clutter and grab consumers by their collars, demanding their attention.
BRAND CENTRAL: MD Anderson underwent a holistic, five-year rebranding process to refine its brand positioning and promise, and to refresh its visual identity. Pictured above: Sarah Newson, MD Anderson’s associate vice president of communications.
The logo, which first made its indelible mark on the health care community May 3, 2010, may be the most tangible component of MD Anderson’s comprehensive brand overhaul, but it certainly doesn’t act alone.

MD Anderson started the rebranding process in 2005, realizing it needed to understand, address and potentially change the way people throughout the United States and the world interpret the brand, explains Alicia Jansen, the cancer center’s associate vice president of marketing.

“We hadn’t looked at the brand holistically since MD Anderson started more than 70 years ago,” she adds. And the cancer center’s logo hadn’t been updated for 23 years—it wasn’t easily adaptable to the Internet or for use in social media channels.

But that was all about to change.

**THE PROBLEM**

There was a time in the not-so-distant past when MD Anderson was sending out multiple marketing messages simultaneously, some of which contradicted each other and all of which curtailed the success of each other. This “brand soup,” as Jansen calls it, put the burden of sifting through marketing missives on consumers instead of on the organization.

As is the case with most health care institutions, every department had initiatives to promote and success stories to share. So instead of channeling news, promotions and the like through one gatekeeper to ensure messaging and design consistency and to avoid over-saturating consumers, departments created emails, posters, brochures, fliers and other communications without much insight into what was happening down the hall. Brand clutter was producing mixed communication messages; each department was starting from scratch with every new communication endeavor; and no one was learning from the mistakes or successes of each other.

The left hand was operating independently of the right, resulting in brand confusion, which could ultimately lead to brand fatigue. MD Anderson leadership realized that if its brand requires consumers to think too much about its purpose or the benefits it offers, then the battle is lost before it even begins.

Understanding and accepting a brand should be effortless for the end user. It shouldn’t be an endeavor or exercise rooted in trial and error.

“A brand can be easily destroyed if not managed well,” Jansen says. MD Anderson wasn’t about to let that happen to its brand, either internally or externally.

The comprehensive brand review that the cancer center began in 2005 measured all aspects of MD Anderson’s performing brand, focusing on developing a brand strategy to complement the business growth strategic plan. It revealed that the institution’s “brand was an asset, not just a marketing tool,” Jansen says. MD Anderson’s leadership and advisory teams realized that they needed to keep the brand in the forefront of consumers’ minds to keep them from dismissing it.

The brand review also confirmed that national (and international) awareness of the institution was quite low among the general public, leaving communities beyond Texas virtually unaware of MD Anderson. And as an option for cancer treatment, “our voice was small compared to other cancer centers in the area,” Jansen explains. The brand review included an internal audit of MD Anderson’s communication tools, leading to external and internal benchmarking that’s still in use today.

**MD ANDERSON IDENTIFIED FIVE BRAND CHALLENGES:**

1. **Brand interpretation:** MD Anderson did not have an understanding of how its brand promise was being perceived across its many stakeholders.

2. **Brand asset performance:** MD Anderson’s previous logo and other brand assets did not differentiate the organization nor communicate its mission as strongly. In addition, the assets were dated, fading into the current communications environment.

3. **Brand voice:** With the volume of communications being disseminated from the organization, MD Anderson noticed a dilution of the brand. This dilution was due, in part, to the lack of a unified design and messaging system.
4. Brand growth: Due to growth in the past 10 years and the mission to be a global leader in cancer care, several national and global relationships were established and a brand architecture and management system had not been implemented to unite or tie the strategy together.

5. Brand management: MD Anderson used a cross-functional approach to communicating its brand and did not have a strategy to manage its current approach, much less future growth.

With their work cut out for them, the leadership and advisory teams, along with MD Anderson’s marketing, communications and public affairs departments, forged ahead, crafting a strategy that would unify, extend and strengthen the brand throughout Texas, the U.S. and the world.

THE STRATEGY

MD Anderson structured this comprehensive review to align its brand for the future and match the leadership of its clinical and research expertise. This review included these key tactics:

- **National brand awareness study:** To understand national aided and unaided awareness levels, referral preferences and decision-making criteria, competitive landscape and brand strengths and weaknesses. This audit was conducted across several audiences.
- **Leadership interviews:** To understand the interpretation of MD Anderson’s strategic direction and challenges it faces for the next 10 years from its top executives.
- **Internal communications audit:** To determine current messaging, the communications’ look and feel, and the quantity of key deliverables across touch points.
- **Financial valuation:** To determine the financial worth of the brand.
- **Position and architecture roadmap:** To develop MD Anderson’s brand positioning and brand promise. To articulate its architecture strategy for internal naming and external relationships.
- **Logo and visual refresh:** To update the logo to reflect MD Anderson’s mission and growth, allowing it to be flexible for current and future communication mediums. To refresh its visual identity to allow continuity across multiple touch points.
- **Brand management:** To create a website that offers education, standards, a stationery ordering system, downloadable tools and templates. To create a brand care team to approve brand and design decisions, manage changes and create a strategy for future growth.

Everyone involved seemed to have a different vision for MD Anderson’s universal brand, but to execute this initiative properly and effectively, the brand core team had to win over people in the organization. They conducted focus groups, both internally and externally, developing a framework for the MD Anderson brand that included a positioning statement, a brand promise, key attributes and assets.

This new brand architecture allowed MD Anderson to establish a foundation for building a unified brand system. Once the framework was established, the organization worked to update the messaging and the visual representation for the brand. Research verified that the strengths of the brand were its tagline, “Making Cancer History,” and the red line that has been featured in advertising campaigns for nearly 15 years. Both of these elements symbolized the eradication of cancer and communicated a commitment to help patients triumph over their disease.

MD Anderson’s “logo needed to work harder,” Jansen says. It needed to be consistent, strong and present on as many emotional deliverables as possible, like business cards, fliers, posters, etc. “We needed to make the logo a permanent part of our business.” The red line through the word “cancer” in the new logo communicates MD Anderson’s goal of “Making Cancer History” in a unique and recognizable way, embodying the institution’s “strike-through” campaign. The logo is a crucial piece of the brand puzzle; it’s an irreplaceable part of the MD Anderson brand. It is how people perceive the institution, what it does, the direction of its moral compass and more.

THE MAN BEHIND THE NAME

MD Anderson isn’t named for a Dr. Anderson with an M.D., but rather a banker turned founder of a charitable foundation.

Monroe Dunaway Anderson was born on June 29, 1873, in Jackson, Tenn. A banker by trade, he became involved with the cotton business and then moved to Houston in 1907. In 1936, Anderson created the charitable foundation that bears his name and started it off with roughly $300,000. The Anderson Foundation received $19 million after his death in 1939.

The 1941 Texas legislature authorized The University of Texas to create a hospital for cancer research and treatment. The hospital’s location wasn’t specified, but $500,000 was appropriated for the purpose. The Anderson Foundation agreed to match that amount if the hospital would be built in Houston and named for Anderson. MD Anderson is one of the nation’s original three comprehensive cancer centers designated by the National Cancer Act of 1971, and it’s one of the 40 National Cancer Institute-designated freestanding cancer centers today. With more than 18,000 employees spanning 11 million square feet, MD Anderson is the largest comprehensive cancer center in the world.
After several iterations were tested, the new logo was selected and MD Anderson was challenged to extend its spirit to all critical components for the institution. The cancer center realized that a strong, recognizable brand not only attracts patients, but also employees, volunteers and donors who help accomplish the cancer center’s mission on a daily basis. MD Anderson recognized that the visual expression of the brand would need to be flexible for multiple mediums. Therefore, complementary versions of the logo were developed for additional uses, like on social networking sites.

In total, five core elements were incorporated in all communications throughout the institution. The new logo, a complementary color palette, revamped fonts, focus style photography and a red bar were successfully introduced as brand standards and used as consistent elements in all visual communications internally and externally.

Recognizing that change can be a cumbersome process, MD Anderson proactively worked to launch the new look and provide tools to its employees to facilitate this transition. Brand Central, an online portal, was developed to make the process seamless with employees and vendors. It allows stakeholders to learn about the new look, download templates, order business cards and stationery, review new graphic standards and get assistance with questions related to managing the brand. To make the transition clear to external stakeholders, several deliverables such as advertising, brochures, templates, social media and partners’ materials were updated with key brand elements.

**THE SUCCESS**

The bold red line striking through cancer has now become synonymous with MD Anderson. It has witnessed wide acceptance of its new brand tools and compliance with its newly implemented standards and templates. In addition, the consistency seen in communications indicates that the cancer center is successful at espousing the same key messages and visual identity, which ultimately helps drive home the brand to key stakeholders.

In addition to the acceptance and use of these brand tools, local, national and international launch efforts are proving effective in communicating the intent of the refreshed brand. In a recent international survey of more than 950 consumers and potential patients in Mexico, 89 percent of respondents stated that the new MD Anderson logo clearly communicates the organization’s one aim to beat/treat/cure cancer, that it is a specialized cancer center and other key messages.

For eight of the past 10 years, including 2011, MD Anderson has ranked No. 1 in cancer care in U.S. News & World Report’s “America’s Best Hospitals” survey. In 2010, it was named the AMA Houston Marketer of the Year in the health care hospital/institution category.

In 2010, it was named the AMA Houston Marketer of the Year in the health care hospital/institution category. During fiscal year 2010, more than 105,000 people came to the cancer center for treatment (one-third of them were new patients), and nearly 10,000 people joined clinical trials exploring advanced treatment options.